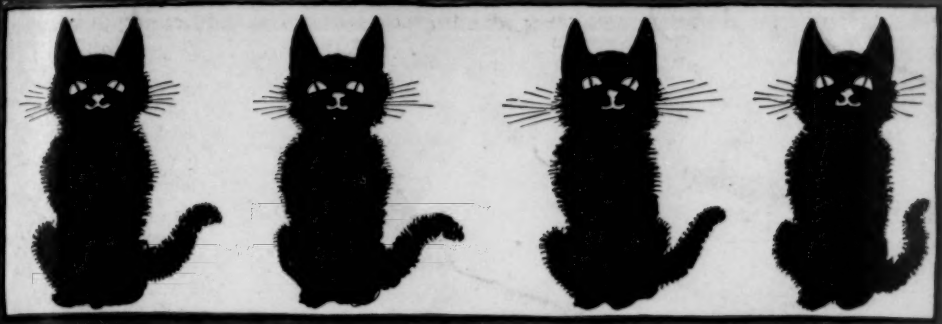


January 1906

The Black Cat

At the Third Hour
$100 Prize
Crete Warren.

The Man Who Drank a Railroad Report
F.F. Tomblin.

The Long White Trail
$350 Prize
W. L. Lockwood.

Stumpy Wick and the Maverick
Alice Mac Gowan.

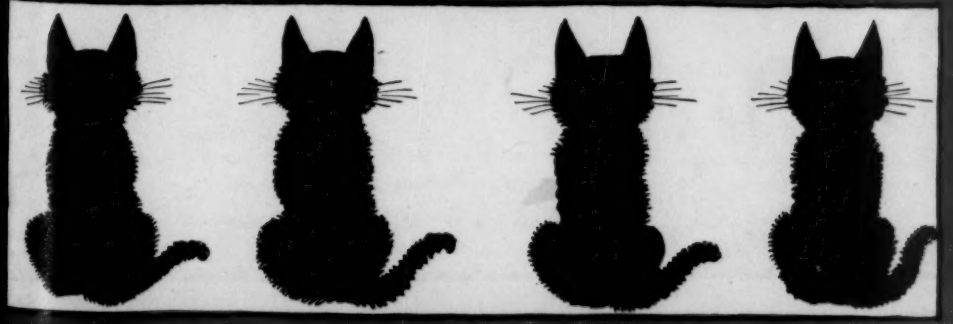
With Flossy's Assistance
Penton Grafton.

The Secret Stair
John Trask.

Vol. XI, No. 4. Whole No. 124. Copyright, 1906, by THE SHORTSTORY PUBLISHING CO.

Price 5 Cents

THE SHORTSTORY PUBLISHING CO.
144 HIGH ST., BOSTON, MASS. and 10 Norfolk Street, Strand, London W. C.



WHEN IT COMES
TO HOUSE
CLEANING
USE
SAPOLIO
BIRD

LIBRARY of CONGRESS
Two Copies Received
DEC 16 1905
Copyright Entry
dec. 2. 1905
CLASS B XXc. No.
105478
COPY B.

The Black Cat

A Monthly Magazine of Original Short Stories.

Copyright, 1905, by The Shortstory Publishing Company. All rights reserved.

Vol. XI., No. 4.
Whole No., 124.

JANUARY, 1906.

5 cents a copy.
50 cents a year.

Entered at the Post-Office at Boston, Mass., as second-class matter.

THE BLACK CAT is devoted exclusively to original, unusual, fascinating stories — every number is complete in itself. It publishes no serials, translations, borrowings, or stealings. It pays nothing for the name or reputation of a writer, but the highest price on record for *Stories that are Stories*, and it pays not according to length, but according to strength. To receive attention, manuscripts must be sent unrolled, fully prepaid, and accompanied by addressed and stamped envelope for return. All MSS. are received and returned at their writers' risk.

CAUTION. — *The entire contents of* THE BLACK CAT *are protected by copyright, and publishers everywhere are cautioned against reproducing any of the stories, either wholly or in part.*

At the Third Hour.*

BY CRETE WARREN.

IT was a cold, disagreeable day, late in November, and the cutting wind blew in fierce little gusts around the corners of the tall city buildings. The streets were almost deserted, save for a few men and women who, muffled almost beyond recognition, hurried with heads bent in face of the wind, which seemed to come from every direction. The thermometer registered several degrees below zero, and the sky was heavy, with every indication of snow. No one noticed that the great clock in the Court House had stopped, and at three o'clock no one missed the striking of the hour.

At just one minute before three the power which ran the clock was turned off, and, for the first time since it was started, several years before, the great hands were still. The nut which held the hands in place had become loosened, and a man skilled in the mechanism of clocks had been called to tighten the screw.

It was a perilous undertaking. The clock was three hundred and eighty feet above the street, and his only way to get at it was by lowering himself from a lookout thirty feet above. The face measured twenty-four feet, the minute hand was nearly twelve feet

*Copyright, 1905, by The Shortstory Publishing Company. Copyright secured in Great Britain. All rights reserved. The writer of this story received a cash prize of $100 in THE BLACK CAT story contest ending October 12, 1904.

long, the hour hand nine. These hands were very heavy and solid, of wood covered with galvanized iron, and were two feet thick.

The man stood for a minute, gazing out over the city, after fastening the rope which was to let him down to the clock. He planned to gain a footing on the hour hand, which was almost horizontal at this hour, and work his way across to the center, where it would take him but a moment to tighten the screw, get back to the rope and pull himself up. He drew a deep breath and carefully let himself over the stone railing of the lookout.

The snow was now falling fine and fast, driven hard by the wind. The man was almost blinded by it, when he felt his foot firm upon the hour hand. The rope was barely long enough, and he wished he had taken a longer one, but he thought it would not pay to go back, as long as this one would reach, though he realized that it would be harder for him to get back with the short one. Sitting down, he slid over to the center and commenced his work. Every moment the snow became more blinding, and as he glanced downwards he noticed that he could not see the streets below.

He had finished and was just about to start back for the rope, when he heard a great whirr inside the clock and almost at the same time felt a jerk of the hand upon which he was seated. He made one mad, hurried move towards the end of the hand, when all at once his every sense seemed to be paralyzed by the deafening sound of the chimes. The sound seemed to vibrate through every part of him, and it was impossible to attempt to move until the last of the three deep tones striking the hour died away, and he felt another jerk of the hand beneath him. It was but an instant, and he had gained the end of the hand and was cautiously getting to his feet. He reached for the rope. The wind was blowing it and he could barely touch it with the ends of his fingers! He groaned aloud and strained every ligament in an effort to get a hold on the rope, but it seemed impossible. At last it was almost within his grasp — but, with a jerk which nearly unbalanced him, the hand again slipped, and the rope was hopelessly out of reach! It seemed to the desperate man that his reason must go in that awful instant!

He re-seated himself, for the shock had weakened his knees and his strength seemed gone. The cold was intense and there was no way of making anyone hear a cry for help. Nor was there any

chance of anyone discovering his danger. With every minute the hour hand slipped downward over an inch, and — merciful heaven! As he looked up at the great minute hand he realized what an awful fate would overcome him in a few minutes if some help did not come to him. With every minute the descending hand brought certain death so much the nearer! Good God! Must he sit there calmly and count the minutes until he should be gradually crushed to death? For at a quarter past the hour, the minute hand must pass the hour hand on which he was seated, and the distance between the two was only a little over two inches!

His brain seemed dead. He couldn't think. His gaze was fascinated by the rapidly descending hand which was either to crush him to death or hurl him off on to the steeply-slanting roofs of the building two hundred feet below. He glanced down. Would it not be better to jump then and end the horrible suspense? No, he loved his life, and then — some help might come. And so he waited. The minutes, which had seemed to come so rapidly upon each other at first, now seemed slower and slower, until he wondered if the clock might not be stopping. But no, it came on and on, this dreadful thing which was to kill him. He found himself calculating whether it would crush him or knock him off. He wished the hands moved steadily instead of in those terrible jerks. One more jerk, or minute, and the hand would touch his head. He crouched over and waited. The hand descended and he could not sit up without touching it. He must lie flat — it would be easier that way, he thought, and he was quite calm now.

All this time he had been sitting with his face toward the clock, his feet hanging down between the hour hand and the dial. As he raised his feet to lie on the hand he suddenly stopped, and in a moment was getting over the side of the hand next to the clock. Yes, there was room for his body if he could hold his weight until the minute hand had passed the hour hand, and then he could raise himself again to his former position. His muscles were strong, and at first his weight seemed as nothing. The minutes seemed longer now than ever and the biting cold was benumbing his fingers in spite of the heavy gloves he wore. At last, just as it seemed that he must let go, it passed, and he raised himself once more.

But what would this avail him? he thought. Just another hour

of life? He could not endure this for twelve hours, even if he could manage to keep his hold, and this seemed unlikely, for the slant of the hand was making it more difficult each minute to keep his position. In a few hours it would be dark, and with the night, the cold was certain to become more intense, and he would freeze. Death seemed inevitable, but he determined to hold out as long as a ray of hope came to him.

And so on through the lengthening hour. Then he found, with the increasing slant of the hand, that he must devise some other method of hanging on, so he laid himself flat upon the beam, and, with his arms around it, braced his feet against the jut which formed the point. In this way he could keep his position, even though the hands were perpendicular. At each quarter the great chimes rang out, their vibration almost sickening him, so loud and close were they. Quarter past four — and he must soon hang on to the hand again while the other passed. He lowered himself, and this time it was harder than before, for his joints were stiff with the cold, and the altered position of the hour hand made it more difficult to get a good hold. Just as the long hand was passing over the short one, a desperate idea entered the frenzied mind of the man who was making such a fight for his life. Quickly, though with great danger of slipping and falling, he reached one leg and then the other around on to the minute hand, and, just as it passed the hour hand, swung himself upon it.

The horrors of that dizzy journey around the clock on the minute hand, the terrible danger he underwent in changing his position on the hand so as to escape having his head downwards, cannot be expressed in words, but he was saved from death, for at a little after ten minutes past five o'clock, his half-frozen hands reached the rope that meant life to him. And when he had gained the lower halls of the building to take the elevator to the ground floor, the elevator boy stared at him in horror. The man he had taken up less than three hours before was young and his hair had been a rich, dark brown. This was surely the same man — but his hair was as white as the snow falling outside!

The Man Who Drank a Railroad Report.*

BY F. F. TOMBLIN.

IT wouldn't have happened if Clarkson hadn't been a genius, but being a genius, it happened. He had early developed an inclination to loiter about railroad stations, and while still a boy a dispatch operator had taken a fancy to him and taught him telegraphy, and at the earliest moment he could leave home he turned his face westward.

At the division headquarters of the P. Q. Railway, Arizona, an opening was found for him, and he was sent out on the line. His town consisted of the station house, depot and water tank. Water tanks are not particularly interesting objects, but they act as a magnet toward the weary brake-beam artist, as here he can find rest and liquid refreshment, and being few and far between in this country, rarely a train passes one without stopping for water.

Clarkson had not been in his office many days before it was firmly impressed upon him that when a tramp wanders into a desert station, the first thing he wants is water. So is the second and third. His pail of ice-water would be emptied almost as soon as filled, and nothing would remain to testify that it had been filled except a wet and muddy floor, where the tramp had spilled some of the contents of the pail.

Being of a mild disposition and slight build, he did not like to argue with the thirsty, and so he set about a plan whereby he might impersonally rid himself of the water-bugs. Attaching a wire to the floor of his office, he ran it to the handle of the drinking cup, so that any one standing on the wet floor with the cup in his hand would get the full benefit of the telegraph wire when a switch or "ground" wire was put on.

When a tramp came for a drink, Clarkson would wait till the fellow had got well settled back with the cooling ice-water gurgling

* Copyright, 1905, by The Shortstory Publishing Company. Copyright secured in Great Britain. All rights reserved.

down his throat. Then he would tap his connecting wire and send a few casual train orders chasing into the drinker's midst.

Now, it is not an Indian summer's dream of peace to drink a hot, blue-tinted train order with saw-teeth on it, and as this torch-light parade would troop down the thirsty man's throat, he would suddenly let go of the unemptied cup, mutter a few relevant but unseemly remarks and hurry away.

The fame of Clarkson's contrivance spread quickly, and the train men neglected their work to watch for tramps who might chance along to drink a car report, a wrecking order, or a batch of commercial messages. One soft-hearted conductor kindly hauled a "hobo" nearly a hundred miles to give him a drink with special S. F. B. Morse trimmings.

On one of those still and very hot days such as usually precede a storm in that section, a speck appeared in the distance down the railroad track, and Clarkson grinned as he watched it approach. A red, dusty tangle of beard covered the tramp's face, and his lank, shifting person was as raggedly attired as a scarecrow for coyotes. Altogether, he was a most happy and promising subject, and Clarkson tingled with joy as the fellow made straight for the water pail.

When he was well in the act of swallowing, the dispatches were turned on, but he continued drinking without showing the slightest visible concern. Some train hands were near and Clarkson felt that his reputation was at stake. So he turned on another wire and gave the tramp certain "inside information" on the stock market. Nothing happened. In despair Clarkson centered all the seven wires in his charge, including the overland press relay, and let the tramp have them in the next cup of water he drank. In vain. The "hobo" put down the emptied cup and sighed: "Much b'liged. This makes me homesick; makes me think of the old well on the farm. Much b'liged."

Then, with a good share of the telegraphic service of the P. Q. Railway Company secreted in his system, he went forth refreshed and rejoicing.

That night a rush dispatch from the superintendent of telegraphs was received by Clarkson, stating that he had grounded all the wires of the service, held up seven passenger trains, delayed the associated press dispatches, besides embarrassing the running

of three perishable freight extras. The dispatch closed with the query: "What have you got to say for yourself?"

Clarkson studied the message alternatively with the empty water bucket, but not finding in them anything to "say for himself," he decided that he would sleep over the matter and answer in the morning.

He went to bed, but he couldn't sleep. The image of the "hobo" calmly drinking blue-tinted, saw-edged train reports haunted him. Restlessly tossing between his sheets, he considered.

"How did he do it? His interior department may be cyclone-proof from drinking bad whisky, but all the others were as soggy as he, and they showed the effects of the wire all right. No, there's something about that fellow's throat — his stomach — something — "

In another moment Clarkson was out of bed, hurrying on his clothes with the rapidity of a fireman.

A dispatch to the next station brought the reply that the "hobo" had not passed there. Evidently he was still lingering in the neighborhood of the water bucket that had made him homesick. With the aid of a track-hand Clarkson located his man snoring lustily under a switched freight car. He was taken into the station, and, after being securely bound, was told to go quietly to sleep, as worse was to come.

The next morning Clarkson sent his answer to the superintendent's dispatch. It ran:

> Grounding of wires necessary to capture Bert Alvord, and fifteen thousand dollar award. Send sheriff; am holding prisoner.
>
> CLARKSON.

With the sheriff came a number of territorial, railroad and express officials. Bert Alvord, with his pal, who had been killed at the time, had six months previously wrecked an express car, killed the messenger, shot the Governor's nephew, and made off with the treasure box. A standing reward aggregating fifteen thousand dollars was offered by the territory, the Governor, the citizens, and the express and railroad companies, for the outlaw, dead or alive. And Clarkson, who had been given his station chiefly because no one else would have it, had captured Alvord and the fifteen thousand dollars.

"It was this way, gentlemen," continued Clarkson, after the water-pail joke had been explained to the officials, "as I lay abed puzzling how he could have drunk those train reports and yellow press dispatches and not turn a hair, it suddenly flashed over me that out in Hell's Cañon there's a pool of water that petrifies or embalms the throat and stomach of the lost cattle that drink out of it, so they lose all feeling in those parts. Why might not this 'hobo' have drank of that water and got his throat and stomach petrified, so the electricity couldn't affect him? Then I recollected that Bert Alvord had been driven into Hell's Cañon by the posse and lost track of. It only took another thought-and-a-half to work out the problem. The 'hobo' was Alvord, half crazy from his terrible experience, come back to civilization. So I hustled out and got my man; and now for that little fifteen thousand dollar commission."

The "hobo" nodded his head, half foolishly, half surlily. "My only regret is that I ever found that lost trail and got out of Hell's Cañon. What's the good of coming back to life when you've lost your taster?"

Clarkson is superintendent of telegraphs now, and you never can tell where a genius will stop.

The Long White Trail.*

BY W. L. LOCKWOOD.

SLOWLY the snow line crept down the sides of the granite hills, dipping into the draws and slashes and reaching out with spectral fingers toward the cottonwoods that had gone naked of their covering, toward the jackpines and the spruce that had lost the freshness of the long sunlit days. Vagrant clouds of mist drifted over the heights, veiling the eternal whiteness of their summits and casting chill shadows in the gulches and valleys below. There was ice in the sluices, and even the sturdy, brown-faced miners in the little camp shivered at the bite of the water in the boxes at clean-up time.

One by one the weather-stained tents were folded for the long trail back to the coast, where roaring fires were and the haunts of men, and sour-dough bread was not. Even that passion born of the yellow treasure hidden in the creek beds and benches had yielded to the signs that came with the chill winds from the north and the phantom haze that crept down from the snow-capped mountains and drifted in through open tent-flaps in the lengthening darkness of the nights.

To veterans of a hundred Northland trails, that far inland hiding-place of Nature's yellow horde was powerless to tempt into the winter's long embrace. With packs on sturdy shoulders they struck across the great divide and left their words of warning to the man behind.

Of their cunning at the pan and sluice-box he had learned. Of their lust of gold he needed none to teach. It was born of his flesh, and had been seared into his soul by every blow and gripe of fortune.

He had followed them over the summer trail to the little camp.

*Copyright, 1905, by The Shortstory Publishing Company. Copyright secured in Great Britain. All rights reserved. The writer of this story received a cash prize of $350 in THE BLACK CAT story contest ending October 12, 1904.

Night and day he had delved and added to his hidden store. He weighed it when others slept that none might see. He shunned them for their games and open-handed prodigality, lest he might have to play and lose.

A tenderfoot he had come; but love of gold had made him shrewd. The dogs that strayed from Siwash camps he fed and kept. A pair of snowshoes he had found at a deserted shack along the trail. He treasured these cunningly against the day of need, and ate but sparingly to save the more.

When they left him he dared to weigh his gold by day, to sift the dust through his toil-worn fingers, and spread the nuggets out in rows upon his rough pine table. In the choicest spots of the abandoned claims he delved and burrowed, adding always to the dull yellow rows upon the table and to the weight of dust in the long moosehide pouch.

Sometimes at night the silence settled heavily on him. Then he called the dogs and talked to them until the light returned again. But when he labored in the ground at day there was naught to think of save the object of his search, his life — gold. He did not fear the silence then.

And so the days went on and the snow-line crept down and down until his tent and all about were white. The eager cold nipped at his frail body and touched the surface of the creek to mirrored stillness. The white drifts followed him in his quest. He shovelled them away with frantic energy lest they should hide his treasure. But in the morning they had come again — each morning — persistently, insistently, remorselessly.

His strength failed before the task at last. That night he weighed his treasure a dozen times and reckoned up each ounce and pennyweight and grain. He laughed at the goodly weight until the dogs slunk into the shadows of the tent in fear at the unwonted sound.

Wise had he been in staying on, for those extra, golden days had added ounces to his horde. On the morrow he would go back to the homes of men, where flowers grew, where things were green and fruits were ripe, and the sun was warm.

But when he had lashed his slender stock of food, his tent and stove and blankets on the ill-made sled, and hitched the dogs

before the load, they could not draw it through the drifts of white. He beat them in the sudden fury the knowledge gave, for he had thought that with such wise provision he had outwitted those who had given warning ere they went.

He stood irresolute and watched the snow drift down upon his old camp site, whitening the rusty balsam boughs that had been his bed so long, mantling the table where his treasure had been spread so oft. The cold gripped at him, and he tramped ahead upon his clumsy snowshoes to warm his stiffening joints. When he returned there was a beaten pathway for his sled. He shook the dogs roughly to their feet and struck them with a stick. He helped them start the load. The sled moved on throughout the length of the trampled way. He had learned the lesson of the beaten trail, and all day long he plodded on before and back again, then drove the dogs and sled ahead along the winding creek.

And when night came he made another camp and fell upon his blankets spent. But sleep did not come. The great silence of the night sang in his ears with strange and terrifying voices. The dogs huddled close to him as if in fear of the awful stillness. It seemed to weigh upon the canvas of his tent with the falling snow. A tree snapped with the growing cold like a rifle's crack. He cried aloud at the sudden sound. A timber-wolf in the wastes above howled its weird, long-drawn, unearthly note of hungry longing. The dogs whined uneasily and crawled the nearer.

He was glad when morning came. The eager frost stung him. His limbs were stiff and numb. But he dared to move in the light of day, to break the profoundness of the night's appalling silence. Again he made the path ahead that dogs and sled might follow. Again night found him but a little way advanced upon The Long White Trail.

Blindly he followed the stream's winding way, his only guide the knowledge that it would lead him sometime to the coast. How far, how long, he dared not guess. Day followed day, and with each one the load of food upon his sled grew less.

The dogs grew weary and unwilling. There were places where the mountains hemmed in the stream to narrow width, and racing through the rock-strewn channel the angry waters gnawed the ice and made it thin. He barely saved his sled and dogs from air-

holes in the crust, and once he had to pack upon his back the load high up the mountain side, around a cañon where the swift current ran naked of its icy covering.

The stream broadened to a river's span. The snow-white reaches stretched on ahead interminably.

He came to measure his slender stock of food by its weight in gold and balanced it against the mooseskin bag. Then, turning an elbow in the stream, he came upon a hut of logs rudely chinked with moss and sod. He cried for joy at sight of human habitation and the promise of finding food within. He pushed the door ajar. A gaunt, hungry man with snow-white beard was huddled by the fire. He turned in mute surprise, then begged in his Maker's name, for food, with outstretched, withered, eager hands.

The miner slammed the door and dragged the dogs away in breathless haste to guard the handful of flour and beans upon his sled from such importuning. Faint and trembling, he turned at last to make sure of his escape. The man had struggled to the door and stood with hands still outstretched in mute appeal.

His food was gone at last. The dogs had naught to eat. Over the meagre scraps of his last rind of bacon they fought until he beat them to subjection. Even then they snapped at him and licked the red spots on the snow with savage gulps.

A dog broke from his leashing. The snarling of the wolves was louder than before that night. He waited the next day until almost noon. The dog did not return. After that he had to help them draw the sled and break the trail as well. The other dogs grew lame. There were crimson splashes on the snow in the trail they left. The load grew heavier. More snow fell.

He hugged the moosehide pouch the closer through the dark, still hours. He dreamed of the comforts it would buy, the meat and bread, the luscious fruits, the warming wines. He tried to make it stay the pangs that gnawed and griped at his sunken maw. He argued with every cunning of his soul that it would yet mend all ills, purchase for him all things he craved. But the old logic of his days of poverty would not stay the pain or give him zest to battle with The Long White Trail. He pushed the treasure from his side, but kept it still in reach.

The snow clouds drifted off behind the hills, and the sun came

out, heartening man and dogs. It fell upon the wide expanse of snow in dazzling splendor, reflected in blinding light as from a surface of burnished silver. It burned his face and set the dogs to blinking. But it was warmth and cheer, and he struggled on.

That night the smoke from the camp stove almost blinded him. His eyes burned as if on fire.

The next day the heavens were still ablaze, the snow more beautiful in its expanse of white. The dogs went haltingly at their task. The runners froze to the trail and screamed as he strained and pushed behind the sled. He struck his leader sharply with a thong. The dog growled sullenly and showed his fangs. After that he pulled less willingly.

The sun climbed higher. Shadows flitted across the dazzling breast of white. Great violet and orange streaks shot from shore to shore. The man strained his eyes to watch them as they vanished in the timber on the bank.

When he looked again, the trail ahead, that he had trodden with weary steps, had melted in the dull red glow of all about. His eyes smote him with sudden pain. He closed them and struggled on, but the glare was there within, beneath his aching lids.

He opened them after an hour of toiling behind the sled. The world was dark.

He raised his sightless eyes to heaven where the sun had been. The pain sent him reeling. But there was no light. Darkness was everywhere. He had learned another lesson of The Long White Trail.

A great fear came upon him. The sense of loneliness — of desolation, of impotency — outweighed the pain. He fell upon his knees and sought to pray, to offer up some supplication to the God of the eternal solitude. His hands fell upon his treasure lashed securely to his sled. What could he say? To which should he pray?

He dragged the sack from its fastenings, and staggering to his feet, would have hurled it into the darkness of his vanished sight. Instead, he drew it to him and fondled it with tender hands. It was his, he had lived for it, toiled for it, suffered for it.

He shouted to the dogs to up and on. He shook the frosted runners free and gripped the trail rope lest they should leave him

in his snowblind way. The bag of precious dust he cuddled to his breast.

There came a sound of rushing waters in his ears. The snow gave place to the flinty ice. It dipped away suddenly from beneath his feet. He heard the dogs cry out in fear, the sled runners scream upon the slippery way. He could not see to stay his swift descent. He fell and the waters closed above him.

The instinct of his life, the passion of his soul, followed him to the depths below. He clung to his golden treasure with all his strength. He lived again through every minute of his hunger for its getting, through every hour of its accumulation, through every possibility of its possession. Against it he weighed his barren life, and the golden treasure drew him down and ever down to where a gaunt, hungry man stood at a cabin door with outstretched hands, crying to him for food.

Suddenly he threw it from him. The naked soul needed not the things such dross would buy. The knowledge came to him with a sudden pain. Travail and suffering had been ever with his gold. To be free — to crave no longer — to rest — to forget pain and hunger, the mighty silence, The Long White Trail!

Hearing came back to him again. The light smote upon his throbbing eyes. The sense of human presence was upon him. He watched through half-closed eyes the bent figure by the stove, felt the warmth of the blankets about him, drew in the scent of frying moosemeat, of browning bannock. The figure turned with outstretched hands, and gave him food — such food as he had never thought to buy with all his gold.

"Eat, stranger, eat."

"I have no gold to pay."

"No gold could buy what I offer you, for it is the last of all my store. But on The Long White Trail the hungry do not ask in vain."

He ate but sparingly and laid aside the better share.

"There is another I have left beside the trail who needs this more than I."

"It is yours to give as I have given."

He took it and retraced his weary steps over The Long White Trail and never turned to see where he had been rescued from the

river's flow, where his treasure had been given back to its own again.

Night and day he struggled on. Hunger gripped at his weary body, the cold struck at him with icy fangs, wolves cried from the scrub-pines along the way; but he pressed on with his precious treasure, ever on.

The lonely cabin he saw at last. Up the river bank he toiled on hands and knees, too weak to stand. The door was closed and all was still within. He pushed it open with his offering outstretched as the withered, hungry hands had been. He cried aloud with his last breath of pain for some word of greeting, some token that his atonement had not come too late. The silence smote him to the earth and, stumbling, he fell across the threshold of The Long White Trail.

Stumpy Wick and the Maverick.*

BY ALICE MACGOWAN.

SIX feet three was Stumpy Wick, and he could scarcely have weighed a hundred pounds. Narrow shoulders, long, thin legs like a pair of compasses, and a small head atop, gave him a curiously inhuman look. His hair was so blond that it was scarcely more than a very dubious white, and it was scattered over his small head and face in apparently random and irrelevant tufts. He had the tremulous voice of that fowl which the Southern Negro calls "a little ol' shiverin' owl." "It has to come from so far, way up there," one of the cowboys had said of him, "that when it gits to you it has a kind of lonesome, homesick sound."

He came stealing up to the Arizona ranch-house, looking about him, checking, halting, going forward a few steps at a time. Suddenly the door swung open. "Oh, Stumpy! Oh, Stumpy!" cried the pretty young woman in the doorway. "Come right here — I want to talk to you. Come," as he hung back, "I'll tell you what's the matter while you eat your breakfast."

Stumpy's eyes bulged more than ever. He went forward, stepping high like a tarantula, bowing and muttering, in the direction of his partner's young wife. He had been out on a distant range for three weeks, and his return to the ranch-house was always marked by excessive caution. He would scout around it for fifteen or twenty minutes before actually walking up and rapping upon the door, and this rather vociferous welcome seemed to daunt him.

Inside the house, he found voice. "Where's Pretty Thing?" he asked, inquiring for the year-old baby.

"She's asleep — never mind about her," cried the baby's mother, and he noticed that her long, fair hair was down around

*Copyright, 1905, by The Shortstory Publishing Company. Copyright secured in Great Britain. All rights reserved.

her shoulders, her eyes red and swollen, as by weeping. She set food before him silently, and began walking up and down the room, like a woman near distraught.

Suddenly she swung round upon the apprehensive Stumpy and burst out: "I can't bear it — I can't bear it any longer, Stumpy!"

Stumpy reached for his hat; he was instantly on his feet, the sombrero twirling in his hands. "What — me? Can't bear to have me around! Don't wonder none. Lord, I'm that ugly an' — Oh, I'll go — I'll git. I don't blame you — not a little bit. A fellow's old wolfin', rough bachelor partner ain't got no business round after he's got married to a pretty, sweet young lady like you."

"No, Stumpy ——"

"No — course not! I wouldn't stand it, neither, if I was a lady like you. Never mind — don't you never mind — there ain't no manner of offence. Nobody could stand me — but — Pretty Thing — Pretty Thing —— —— His ridiculous, squeaky little voice trailed off in a sort of wail, for the adored baby was creeping through the doorway from the adjoining room.

"I could just wolf it with a blanket, a frying pan, and coffee-pot, and a little coffee and flour and side-meat," he resumed in a spent tone. His wild eye was glued to the baby, as she sat up and put out her fat little arms, with the confident baby cry, "take!" His already dejected face fell comically lower. "I — if you'll just put the baby out — well, on a stump, sometimes, when it's warm and bright; put her a good ways off from the house, where I can come and sorter look at her — I'll git along. 'Cause," gazing apologetically at the mother, "'cause I p'intedly think I'd just die if I didn't git to see Pretty Thing no more."

"You! No — no, Stumpy, 'tisn't anything about you!" cried the girlish mother. She ran to the child, gathering her up, and broke into passionate sobs above the little flaxen head. "Jim's left me — he's deserted me and the baby."

"Sho!" rejoined Wick in a dazed voice. "You're jokin'."

But there was no jest in the young wife's white, tear-marred face. "Jim went to Phœnix nearly two weeks ago," she said in a low, strained voice, "to see about proving up on the Bill Eccles claim. I've never heard a word — never a word. That's

awful, but it wouldn't scare me so only, Stumpy, we've quarrelled and quarrelled," her voice sank almost to a whisper. "I said this was a miserable, lonesome, desolate land; and I — and I ——"

"Great Scott! That all you got to fret about? Why, a little interruption like that — Jim wouldn't think a thing of it — not a thing. Why, me and Jim, when we was runnin' partners — off in them lonesome cow camps — used to fall out and scrap something turrible! People will, when they're in a lonesome place. We'd git after each other with — oh, a fryin'-pan, or anything that come handy. Yit look at the store we set by each other — leastways, look at the store I set by him, and how he was always able and willin' to put up with me."

"No — no — no! I tell you there's no comfort for me, Stumpy. I've thought it all over. My God! — I've thought it over on my knees for hours at a time, this last week. I know he's deserted me! Oh, I can't blame him much — I can't blame him at all, if 'twas only me — I've been so ugly to him. But the baby — how could he desert his child!" and she began to sob.

Wick stood looking down at her from his preposterous and futile height, torn between sympathy and angry resentment. "Now — now, Mrs. Hartley," he began in that ridiculous crow of his. 'I don't want to say nothing that ain't perfectly respectful — an' complimentary, too; but I'm bound to tell you that when you say such things as that about Jim — you talk like a blame fool!"

It was out! Wick's eyes were big with terror and excitement. Such a speech was to him like defacing the sacred images in the temple. But the girl, to his mighty relief, burst into half hysterical laughter. "Oh, Stumpy — Stumpy Wick! I just love to hear you say that, because it means that you've got faith in Jim. But I can't — I haven't."

"Faith in Jim! Well, I guess I have! If him and me has run partners for nine or ten year, and him never goin' back on me no matter what I done, and us comin' through some awful tight places — well I'd be ashamed of myself if I didn't have faith in Jim."

Young Mrs. Hartley dried her eyes. "And you want me to be ashamed of myself, too," she commented. "Well, I expect

I ought to be, and for more reasons than you know. But I tell you, Stumpy, I've tried Jim's patience awfully in the last six months. He's had to be a mighty good man to put up with me and my whining to go back to Mother where everything was made easy for me. It would serve me just right if he has deserted me."

"No, and it wouldn't serve you just right, neither. And he hain't deserted you a little bit. Lots of things can happen to a man in this here cattle-country — just to delay him, you know ——" as Jennie started in alarm. Yet, altogether, Stumpy left her cheered, encouraged, and waiting for her Jim with a stouter heart; resolved, too, that Jim should return to a better wife than the one he had left behind him.

"Now, Jim, he's just about got up there to Phœnix," Stumpy thought, as he rode forth to pursue Jim's neglected duties about the ranch, "and he's took a drink or two too much." Then he squeaked, "Lord, what a fool I am! Jim never did do that in his bachelor days. I'm forgittin' that 'tain't me that's missin'! If 'twas ——" and Stumpy cackled a laugh that caused a prairie dog, nearby, to throw up his paws and collapse down into his burrow in despair.

Mechanically he went about the chores, soliloquizing, "Say, Jim's got off into the Coyote Mountain country — maybe clean into the Coyotes — and got himself plumb lost. Huh! I reckon I'm the biggest fool that rides the Arizona ranges — or, anyhow, the longest. The idea of Jim Hartley cuttin' out into the mountains and gittin' lost — a fellow that knows this country like he knows the inside of his own pocket!"

As he narrowed down the possibilities, the whole thing began to look sinister to Stumpy. Not that he thought for a moment his partner had deserted his wife and baby; but it began to look as though some ugly thing had happened to the man. Pete McKesson's gang had had it in for Jim, this long while. Say he'd met one of them on his long, long ride from Phœnix, across the mountains — suppose he had tried to ride on to Altamont — that would take him over ground that the McKessons held to be their own. Stumpy pulled up Trojan and sat in no very pleasant revery.

Suddenly out of his brown study Stumpy emerged to see an unbranded yearling capering away before him. Now it was Stumpy's business — and a piece of business which he quickly accomplished — to rope the absconding animal. The rope was made fast to the saddle horn, and then the rider jumped down and ran toward the prostrate calf to tie it and set Jim's brand upon it.

And then what did Gray Trojan — celebrated in every cow-camp that would listen to Stumpy's stories, a noted character, a faithful ally, trusted like an old partner, and relied upon absolutely — what did Gray Trojan do, at this critical juncture, but suddenly turn his back upon his good reputation, and all that had gone to build it up for him! When the yearling jumped to its feet, and with a loud bleat bolted down the cañon, Gray Trojan, instead of pulling him back, and holding him till branded, bolted with him. He tossed up head and tail, flung heels (and self-respect) into the air, and was away the instant he felt the jerk upon the saddle-rope.

Down the cañon went the snorting, bellowing, cavorting yearling; and galloping gaily behind it, attached to it by the long saddle-rope extending from its neck to the saddle horn, ambled Gray Trojan. In the rear stalked the perspiring and raging Stumpy, blundering into dog-holes, and over cactus and rocks. By turns he blasphemed and threatened, by turns he coaxed and cajoled. Half a dozen times he drew his six-shooter and threatened Gray Trojan's life. But in the end he doubled his long legs up and sat heartbrokenly down upon a rock — Gray Trojan and the maverick were but a wavering line of motion upon the horizon's edge — and mopped his streaming brow.

After waiting till the painful drumming in his ears had somewhat subsided, he hobbled weakly back to the ranch. Only a cowboy used to meeting every exigency of life a-horseback, knows what it is to toil five long miles in high-heeled cowboy boots, which were never intended for the pedestrian.

Omitting his usual absurd precautions, Stumpy Wick fairly bolted into the presence of the rancher's wife, where she sat silent and brooding.

"I reckon I've sent my soul to hell," he burst out. "I've

cursed all of five miles — and," he lowered his voice, to a curious tragic whistle, "and cursed Gray Trojan!"

"Oh, is that you, Stumpy?" said Jennie, with pitiful listlessness.

Stumpy had dropped into a chair, gasping, mopping his face, taking stock of his bruised and weary long legs and feet.

"W'y, ye — yé — yes — I — I —I think it's me. I believe this is Wu-Wu-Wumpy Stick! Aw — you know, Mrs. Hartley, I mean S-S-Stumpy Wick!" And even the pale, sad Jennie smiled. Whereupon:

"I'll never speak to Gray Trojan again!" Stumpy declared in his "shivering owl" voice, nursing his long, lame legs. "He's a traitor and — and — a perjurer!" he added, weakly.

"Why, Stumpy, what's he done?" inquired Jennie, curiously.

"Done!" screeched Stumpy, taking breath again, as another wave of wrath at his beloved pony's sudden faithlessness swept over him, "Done! Why, he's gone stravagin' 'round over the face of the earth roped to a maverick — 'stead o' settin' back on the rope an' holdin' him to be branded!"

A little beguiled of her distress, Jennie questioned, and the sputtering Wick responded with the particulars of his misadventure. "An' I'll never go near him," he concluded, waving his arms wildly; "I'll — he can starve!"

"Let me trail him up, Stumpy," Jennie cried suddenly, jumping to her feet. "I'll go crazy if I sit and think. You stay here and mind the baby — and let me trail Trojan."

Stumpy Wick cocked one of his ridiculous eyes at his partner's wife. "Gosh!" he began, but checked himself. Here was a tempting prospect of hours of unalloyed delight with Pretty Thing. And here was also a chance to recover Gray Trojan without sacrificing his dignity, or going back upon his word.

Quickly saddling the best pony in the corral — which chanced to be Jim's own pet, Pretty Man — Jennie Hartley loped away upon the broad trail left by Gray Trojan and the maverick. It led through curious places, and took her much farther than one would have thought a calf could go in so short a time. She found herself at length in a part of the range quite new to her. The trail led now down a sort of side-draw wholly strange to her, in

the middle of which, like a gigantic bubble, rose a little mound, covered with piñon scrub and thickly strewn with boulders. To her intense surprise, the track led directly up this small hill.

"What a curious place for a cow pony to go, among these rocks," she mused. "He must have been dragged there."

Then she caught a glimpse of Trojan himself, a dejected pony indeed, apparently staked on the very top of the mound. Here, surely, was human intervention. At the sinister possibilities suggested she brought Pretty Man to a stand in his tracks, and the thought of the McKesson gang flashed into her mind. No calf was in sight; but the man who had staked Trojan must be near by. Approaching the summit with the greatest caution, Mrs. Hartley now noticed that the pony's stake rope was very short, and she started with surprise when she discovered that it was not around his neck, but made fast to the saddle horn, as though he had been staked hastily with a portion of the saddle rope.

Again she halted, just as Trojan sighted them, and ran back hard upon his tether, turning his head, whinnying and snorting. A keen glance around satisfied Jennie that there was no human being within earshot. She called: "Trojan! Hey, Trojan! Good boy, Trojan!" The pony tugged again at the rope, neighing his uneasiness and his whinny was followed by a strange, hollow mockery of a human voice, floating up from the very bowels of the earth:

"Jennie! Oh, Jennie! Is that you?"

Jennie's face went white as paper. "Am I going mad?" was her thought. "Have I brooded until ——"

But again that ghostly mockery of Jim's voice cried upon her, and now more urgently, more imploringly. With a bound Jennie was off Pretty Man's back, and running forward to where the end of Gray Trojan's stake-rope appeared to be sunk into the ground. She was amazed to find that it went down an opening about three feet across; and out of this opening the strange voice ascended.

"Jim! O Jim!" she cried, peering down into a pit of darkness. "If I'm crazy — but oh, speak to me again, anyhow!"

"Yes, Jennie — yes, honey, it's me. You hurry and take this fool calf off me — he's just about mashed me to death," was the astounding reply.

With desperate hands, made strong by a mingling of emotions, Jennie seized the rope where it drew taut over the edge of the rocky opening, and giving the word to Trojan, pulled amain. As the trained cow-pony felt the give of the lariat, he "set back" promptly, and about three feet was drawn up before the rope again caught, and the pair were brought to a standstill.

"Lord!" came up from below, "what a blessed relief!"

A smooth piñon sapling, hastily placed across the opening, helped matters wonderfully, and with this primitive pulley and Gray Trojan's valiant assistance, the dead maverick was at last hauled out. Jennie got the noose off its neck, and — still with the same desperate haste — sent the rope down to Jim.

The struggle to get her splendid six-foot husband up and out taxed all the strength and skill both Jennie and Gray Trojan possessed. But she had him out at last, and in her arms, covered as he was with ashes, exhaling a strange, sulphurous smell, and with the breast of his flannel shirt stuffed full of little, gaily-painted bows and arrows and brightly-beaded moccasins.

"Talk about repenting in sackcloth and ashes, dear," cried Jim, when he had at last gently released himself from Jennie's embrace, and silenced her remorseful confessions with a kiss; "God bless your brave heart, and good wits, I've been doing just that since ten o'clock last night."

When the two happy young people turned to mount, they found that Gray Trojan had quietly bolted — "Gone to make his apologies," commented Jim, when Jennie told the story of Stumpy's experience with the maverick. "Well, never mind, honey. I feel like one chair'd be a-plenty for us both to set in, and one pony enough for us to ride, for the rest of our born days."

So they both rode home on the somewhat scandalized Pretty Man. Jim explaining:

"I was riding through the Coyotes — on my way from Phœnix — going at a long, slantin' run, you bet — when McKesson's gang got after me. My borrowed horse hunted up a prairie dog hole and chucked his foot in it. He threw me, and then run as soon as we both got up. We were right at the bottom of that queer little hill — place I'd never been before — and I ran up it as fast as I could, after that fool of a horse. It was dark, you

know, and I fell in, and laid there in the ashes all night. And this morning that maverick fell in on me, so that I couldn't budge, and would have laid there and died if it hadn't been for the best wife a good-for-nothin' cowpuncher ever had."

Jennie smiled happily. "That hill's all ashes inside, Jennie," he went on; "and it's as hollow as a bubble. I guess it's an old volcanic crater. The Indians seem to think that the devil lives there. They come and throw in these things every spring to please him. I brought 'em up for the baby."

. . . . . .

As the happy, reunited couple came suddenly around a sharp turn in the trail leading to the ranch-house door, they caught sight of a spidery form perched upon a stump, with long legs twisted into a grotesque knot, and lanky arms curled lovingly about their slumbering offspring.

"S-h-h-h!" cried Stumpy Wick in a high, sibilant whistle intended for a whisper, holding up a crooked finger with a warning gesture, — without word or look of surprise or greeting to his partner — "S-h-h-h — Pretty Thing's asleep!"

With Flossy's Assistance.*

BY PENTON GRAFTON.

THERE was a faint smile of pride on Mrs. Harlow's piquant face, though her eyes were full of tears. Acting upon a sudden impulse, she had remained concealed by the screening vines, and the projecting corner of the house when Miss Spear, driving briskly up to the horse-block, hitched her horse and strode grimly up the walk. A clergyman's wife should not shirk the duty of hospitality, and, now that the nature of Miss Spear's errand was revealed, she experienced a very genuine remorse. The study window, near at hand, was open and, through it, the woman's dry tones and the young clergyman's responses were clearly audible. How delicate and tactful Douglas was in his sympathy! Surely, it was unusual in so young a man — hence the smile of pride. The tears were for the woman who now experienced a mother's loss.

Miriam drew another of her husband's socks from her work-bag and, while inspecting it critically, resolved to accompany her husband on the call that he was promising for that afternoon, when the rustle of garments announced Miss Spear's departure.

"Oh, there was another thing I wanted to speak about," the visitor said, hesitatingly. "Mother had a pet she always set great store by, and, if you've no objections, I'm sure she would have liked to have Flossy at the funeral."

"Certainly I have no objection," Mr. Harlow said, with youthful and inexperienced cordiality. "I know how attached to such a pet one may become. An animal is often the truest of friends."

"I'm glad you see it in that light." The woman's voice reflected a certain relief. "Some folks thinks it's jest foolishness — and I didn't know but you'd be that kind. Well, I must be goin'. I'm sorry I couldn't send you word that mother was failin', but it come

* Copyright, 1905, by The Shortstory Publishing Company. Copyright secured in Great Britain. All rights reserved.

so sudden I warn't in no ways prepared. I'd like to have the service tomorrow at two and, if you'll drive over this afternoon, we can make all the arrangements."

A few earnest and heartfelt words from the young clergyman, and then the screen door slammed. Instantly a charming face appeared at the study window, against the background of vines. "Douglas," whispered the apparition, anxiously, "Did she say what kind of a pet that was?"

"Why, no," he answered, drawing nearer the pretty vision, that was in danger of distracting his mind from the important matter. "A cat, I suppose — or a dog. I think she gave it a name, but I hardly noticed."

"It might be a *parrot!* Do hurry and ask her before she can drive away," she urged.

Her husband looked perplexed. "What difference can it make?" he queried. "I have given my consent to its presence at the service." But, yielding to his wife's urging, he hurried down the walk, just as Miss Spear gathered up the reins.

"By the way, Miss Spear," he said, awkwardly, leaning across the fence, "I neglected to ask what kind of a pet that was. I believe you mentioned some name, but I have forgotten it."

Miss Spear looked at him suspiciously; his embarrassment seemed indicative of a withdrawal of his compliance with her request. "Flossy's a lamb," she said, succinctly — then severely awaited retraction.

"Ah, — yes, — thank you," Mr. Harlow ejaculated gratefully. His relief at finding that it was not a parrot was intense. As Miss Spear drove off, he walked thoughtfully back, projecting various methods of working the lamb into his remarks on the morrow.

"Well?" queried Miriam, beckoning him to her retreat with her stocking darner.

"It is a lamb," he answered, pushing the thick hair back from his forehead. "I confess that your suggestion of a parrot was startling," he went on, seating himself on the piazza rail with a reminiscent twinkle in his eye. "There is something so unexpected about those evil birds. Now, a lamb is another matter. I can easily work it into my remarks, and also into the Scripture reading."

"Yes," Miriam said, demurely, her eyes bent upon her work, "There is the verse about the 'lion and the lamb.'"

Her husband frowned and bit his lip. "Now, my dear," he remonstrated, "You forget that you are a clergyman's wife."

"It has been so short a time," she said, naïvely, then looked apprehensively at the screen of vines, to make certain that it had concealed her husband's response.

"It is surprising," he said, resuming his seat, "that such a woman as Mrs. Spear should cultivate pets. How little we can judge by exteriors." Evidently his wife's remark about the "lion and the lamb" had led to this reflection; evidently, also, he was very inexperienced in his profession. "Now, what would you think if I said something like this?" and he rehearsed the outlines of the morrow's remarks to a prejudiced listener.

Callers prevented the fulfillment of Miriam's penitential resolve, and Douglas Harlow took the two-mile drive to the Spear farm alone. His road lay past lush meadows ready for the scythe, between blossoming hedge-rows, fair with wild rose and drifts of elder bloom, while all the air was sweet with the intoxicating breath of the wild-grape blossom. The sunshine of the perfect June day filtered through the gloom of the errand that called him afield, and it was with a sense of the joy of life as a fit prelude to the greater joy of the life beyond that he turned his horse's head in at the Spears' open gate, and jolted up the rough road to the bleak and unresponsive farmhouse. From the weather-beaten door fluttered a wisp of crêpe, and the closely-drawn shades gave the house a grim look of defiant sorrow. There was nothing to soften the asperities of this abode of the Spears — even the gnarled lilac bush, at the corner of the house, leaned away as if from an inhospitable neighbor.

After a moment's hesitation, Harlow walked briskly around the corner of the house in search of a less forbidding entrance. As he reached the vine-hung porch that gave access to the living room, a meek "baa-a-a" sounded plaintively from behind him. Forgetting to knock, he wheeled abruptly, eager to catch a glimpse of the pet with which he was to be so intimately associated. Above the tangled grass, beneath a stunted pear tree, rose a triangular face of quite extraordinary mildness, and Flossy and the clergyman

eyed each other curiously. It is not recorded what Flossy thought of the interloper; but Harlow's mind was filled with vague uneasiness. Perhaps the shadows were deceptive, but Flossy, whom he had pictured as a tiny, shivering lamb, exhibited quite unusual proportions. Moreover, there was a curious knobby appearance of the head which his experience with lambs — gained wholly from pictures, for he was a city man, or from the piecemeal acquaintance of the dinner table — had not led him to expect. Just then, a dry, forced cough recalled his errand, and, turning, he found Myra Spear patiently awaiting his attention.

"I beg pardon, Miss Spear," he stammered, "I was looking at — er — Flossy. At least, I suppose it is Flossy."

"Yes — that's Flossy," she answered, in a colorless way. "Won't you walk in?"

"Isn't — er — she rather large?" he queried, as he stepped into the homely room — now unfamiliar in its air of immaculate solemnity.

"He hasn't been sheared yet," she said briefly, with emphasis on the pronoun.

"Oh! I thought — the name —" The young man was involved in a maze of embarrassed explanation, from which his hostess rescued him with dispatch, there being more urgent things to be discussed than Flossy — important as had been his place in the past.

"Mother called him Flossy because he was so soft and white when he was little. Take a chair, or, if you don't mind, perhaps you'll come and look at mother."

There was little hint of the grief and loneliness that filled the sore heart pent beneath the undemonstrative exterior; but to Douglas Harlow had been given that rare quality of sympathy that divines the hidden springs of feeling. His quiet words brought unacknowledged comfort to Myra Spear as they looked upon the severe face, made but a degree more rigid by the touch of death.

"Flossy!" he murmured, as he jogged along his homeward way. *"Flossy!* Surely there were strange elements in that woman's nature."

Miriam, waiting eagerly in the doorway, was quick to notice the frown of perplexity that furrowed her husband's forehead as

he came up the walk with lagging feet. "Poor, tired boy," she said, tenderly. "Come right in to your supper. I've made your favorite salad."

"Little comfort!" he said, pinching her cheek. Beneath the spell of her merry talk the apprehensions awakened by the bulky Flossy dwindled from formidable bugbears to insignificant proportions, and Miriam tactfully avoided questions, being rewarded for her forbearance, at length, by her husband's hearty laugh. But later, he reverted, of his own accord, to the subject of the pet.

"Miriam," he said, looking up in the midst of a magazine article, "I wish you had gone with me."

"Why?" she asked, expectantly.

"To see Flossy — the lamb," he said, with forced gravity.

"It is a cunning little thing — I suppose?" There was a shade of doubt in her tone.

"He's a bouncing, big thing — "

"He!" she ejaculated.

"With a suspiciously knobby head," he pursued, then awaited results.

"Oh, dear — oh, dear!" Miriam gasped, in a spasm of laughter.

"Yes," Harlow said, grimly. "I only hope it will not strike the rest of my people in the same way."

Miriam wiped her eyes. "I don't know but it is as bad as the parrot," she said huskily. "Anyway, I am glad you broke it to me in time so that I can get accustomed to the idea. Perhaps — perhaps, it is a decorous — beast. It must have been brought up carefully."

"Let us hope so," her husband ejaculated, fervently.

"Miriam," he said, anxiously, the next day, as, in the midst of a long train of country vehicles they drew near the Spear house, before which a group of black coats was already gathered, — "don't forget that you are the pastor's wife."

She gave his arm a little, nervous squeeze. "I'll try, Douglas," she answered meekly; "but, oh, I do hope that I shall not be taxed beyond my strength." And with that he was forced to be content.

The weather-beaten faces of the farmers assembled, brightened, and they nodded awkwardly in response to Mr. Harlow's greeting.

Already, the slight, fair man, with heart full of love to his God and for his fellow-men, had impressed them by his earnestness, and won their regard. At a word from his wife, Deacon Simsbury helped Miriam to alight, when Mrs. Simsbury swept her under her ample wing.

"Come an' set by me, Mis' Harlow," she said. "If there's a minute afterward, I want to talk over the next missionary meetin' with you. I wonder what Myra Spear'll do, now her mother's gone. Poor girl! But there — I s'pose she seems real old to you. I'm just runnin' over with pity for her, but Myra ain't one you can sympathize with to her face — she's that shut up an' stiff. P'r'aps she'll come over an' stay a spell with me, though. Come right in this door. I guess we can get seats where we can see an' hear, too."

The last remarks were made in a loud whisper, as she piloted Miriam between the ranks of preternaturally solemn people, who, however, scarcely noticed the advent of the pastor's wife, their absorbed gaze being fixed upon some object not far from the spot where Mr. Harlow had just taken his seat.

"There — can you see, Mis' Harlow?" Mrs. Simsbury asked, anxiously leaning toward her companion, with portentous creakings of her stiff, silk gown. Then her gaze, too, became fixed. "My land!" she breathed, hoarsely.

A ray of sunshine pierced the bowed shutters, falling upon an object which was outside Mrs. Simsbury's funeral experiences. Mindful of the affection that her mother had lavished upon her pet, Myra Spear had relinquished the place that should have been hers to Flossy. With his wool carefully purged of alien sticks and briars, that were its usual adornment, Flossy looked curiously at the gathering company. The meek triangle of his face was thrown into bold relief by a stiff black bow knotted beneath his chin, and, as a precautionary measure, Miss Spear had also encircled his neck with a rope, the other end of which was held by a stolid country boy.

Mr. Harlow, after a decorous interval, ventured a swift glance at his *vis-a-vis*. The glance that met his was, apparently, one of benignity, though, as he looked, to his excited imagination the mild visage acquired a diabolical cast. Evidently, if he would keep his

thoughts in a proper channel, further interchange of glances was inexpedient.

Wheels rattled up the stony road, the screen door opened and closed with subdued bangs, and, with soft rustling of feminine garments and painful squeaking of Sunday shoes, the rooms filled. Oppressed by the fragrance of fading cinnamon roses, Miriam sat with hands tightly clasped in her lap and resolutely turned her eyes from the clumsy, woolly shape of Flossy. Surely she had sat there hours. Would the service never begin?

Just then, the choir quavered through a hymn, and the ensuing hush was broken by the earnest voice of her husband reading the words of comfort which all must some day need. Miriam was fast forgetting her fears, when a restless movement on Flossy's part roused her attention afresh. Harlow had seen it, too, and a faint flush stole over his face. For a moment, he read mechanically, for Miriam's suggestion of the "lion and the lamb" popped into his head, and he wished with all his heart that the milder beast would lie down — or even sit down, if his anatomy permitted.

Closing his Bible, he looked for a moment at the still face beside him, then spoke briefly of the upright life, the high sense of duty, the inflexible standards of her who had gone. He dreaded to touch upon the gentler side of that stern nature as revealed to him within a day; but, feeling that some reference must be made to the incongruous mourner, he desperately recalled the sympathetic remarks he had projected on the previous day.

"My friends," he said, hurriedly, "having recently come among you, I was unaware of what may have been well known as a lovable trait of our sister — her tenderness for dumb animals."

"Baa-a-a!" muttered Flossy, giving the lie to his mistaken adjective.

Harlow gripped his Bible nervously. Surely that was not what he had intended to say. A cold sweat broke out on his forehead as he dwelt upon the unfailing care and affection that she had lavished upon —

"Baa-a-a!" reiterated Flossy, appropriating the remarks, and identifying himself as the recipient of devotion. Miriam's hands were convulsively clenched, and her teeth held her quivering lip. "I'm the pastor's wife — I'm the pastor's wife," she reiterated

incessantly to that irrepressible self, who fell such a helpless victim before the ludicrous. Oh, why would Douglas persist in remarks that called forth such derisive response?

Douglas was in no mind to persist; but he was still less anxious to close his eyes in prayer, for, as he now looked Flossy in the eye, the pet's face was positively evil, and — surely, Flossy winked a Satanic eye. There was no help for it, however, and, with premonition of catastrophe, Harlow bowed his head.

Flossy bowed his head, also, and the stolid keeper of pets grew, suddenly, red in the face, as strength was pitted against strength. A subdued shuffling rose in the room, which Harlow elevated his voice to cover. It grew in volume, and, unable to bear the suspense, Harlow opened his eyes for an instant. Nobody marked this breach of decorum, for, though every eye was open, necks were craned that the gaze of the people could be fixed upon the straining forms of Flossy and the boy. Harlow's voice rose to greater volume, for sundry objurgations were being wrung from the restrainer-of-lambs, attended with angry baas waxing shrill — and yet more shrill.

Then came a fierce trampling and little, suppressed shrieks, while, "Darn yer — git out ef yer want ter — *old devil!*" ejaculated a spent, yet exasperated boy.

Before Harlow could feel more than a pang of apprehension there came the swift thud of charging hoofs, — to be succeeded by a crash in the next room, and Deacon Simsbury's mild voice grown suddenly wrathful as he ejaculated: "Drat the beast!"

"Amen!" said the pastor, innocent of humorous intent, but only anxious to end the disastrous service quickly.

It was the last straw. Miriam gave a gasp — then shook with uncontrollable laughter, pressing her handkerchief convulsively to her face. Then Mrs. Simsbury came to the rescue, like the gallant friend in need that she was. Leaving her spouse to extricate himself from the débris of his chair and rub his aching joints, she put a motherly arm about the pastor's wife and addressed their neighbors.

"Poor dear — her feelin's are too much for her," she said, with perfect truth. "I'll jest take her outside, if you'll let us git by." And, not daring to remove her sheltering handkerchief, Miriam

submitted to be assisted to the outer air where, behind a friendly screen of bushes she finally regained the sobriety she so ardently desired.

"Oh, how good you are, Mrs. Simsbury," she panted, gratefully. "I never could have stood that without disgracing my husband forever," — as, in melancholy quavers —

"Sister, thou wast mild and lovely"

floated out into the radiance of the afternoon. "But what must you think of me?" she ended, in distressful penitence.

"I guess I was built a little that way when I was your age," and Mrs. Simsbury loosened her bonnet strings with a reminiscent chuckle. "An' 'twas enough to try a saint. Myra h'aint no sense of the redicerlous, or she'd 've kept that ram in the barn. S'posin' you ride to the buryin'-ground with me an' let James go with your husband. It'll give you time to calm down."

Late in the afternoon, while her husband unhitched the horse, Miriam stood on the worn stone step and looked up at the calm face above her. The solemn burial service was over, and Myra Spear had returned to an empty house to face a loveless future. A passion of pity and regret swept over the pastor's wife and, acting upon a swift impulse, she put her arms about the lonely woman.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered, with double intent. To her surprise, Myra Spear bent and kissed her, then turned, swiftly, and entered the house, closing the door behind her.

"I'm afraid you ought to have married a different woman," Miriam said, humbly, as her husband turned their horse's head toward home.

Harlow bent and looked deep into her penitent eyes. "The woman who could have borne that is not the woman for me," he said, with conviction.

They were startled by a rustle in the bushes that edged the highway, and a triumphant, malignant, triangular face looked out at them.

"Baa-a-a!" sneered Flossy.

The Secret Stair.*

BY JOHN TRASK.

IT stands at the head of the long, gentle slope of lawns, approached by the winding avenue between the larches, shining against the dark grove rising at its back, its square towers, tall and short, standing as though assembled together for defense, its many small, square windows looking down uncompromisingly across the countryside below, its white walls still harboring in grim distinction the bullets of the Revolution—the house that once sheltered that famous refugee whose name has, for certain reasons, since been kept in our family a matter of silence, the appropriate setting of an old romantic tale. One of its rooms, reached by a stair known only to the inmates, hid him of whom I speak so well that all King George's soldiers, ramping through it, could not find him. Having passed successively to many worthier members of the family, down to the present from Colonial times, it came to me, Richard Clifton, who still perpetuate the name. I found myself at twenty-six its master, a bachelor living, well-content, in peace and plenty in its time-honored, time-toned halls, with a sufficient retinue of servants and an amiable maiden aunt, in rustling, irreproachable black silk, for comfort, respectability, and all else that was fit.

I cared, with deep delight in it, for the wealth of interest and loveliness, outside, that belonged to my domain, its lawns and trees, its shrubbery and copses, the paths and by-ways leading to its mysteries, its surprises and retreats; I revelled, with all the artist blood that was in me, in the house, its echoing corridors, its high-ceiled rooms, the jogs and jolts in its arrangement, its turns and twists at unexpected places, its sweeps of darkened wainscot, its eyrie flights of steps, its undisputed and indisputable aroma of the past. It was not until she came to visit us—that cousin, Elizabeth,

*Copyright, 1905, by The Shortstory Publishing Company. Copyright secured in Great Britain. All rights reserved.

child of my Aunt Matilda Clifton's sister Elsa Vane, the girl whose beauty in the sombre setting of my house filled me with the pleasure that I felt in all things exquisite and suitable in art, that the place became to me a different thing from that which it had been before. I do not mean, as some may think, a place transformed to me because I found myself in love. I did not know that I loved Elizabeth, at first. I caught swift visions of the pictures I should never paint in glimpses of her slim, sweet shape and russet hair against the ancient panelling, among the flights of balusters, through vistas in the stately, old-time rooms. She seemed to my fancy to have come down with the house, a relic of its former glory, a dear shadow of its past, and I bowed in my worship of the beautiful in art. Her step had sometimes given me a warning thrill, but there was an elusiveness, a peculiar witchery about her that, while it drew me to her, kept me and my heart at bay. I had the feeling, hardly to be expressed in words, that if pursued she would be gone, leaving a sound of laughter somewhere in the halls. It was not love, as I said, that had transformed the house. It was a question that Elizabeth had asked not long after she had come.

We were standing, one afternoon, by the newel in the lower hall. We had been speaking of the old story connected with the house, when Elizabeth looked up. Her eyes, searching the stairs, the balcony, the old white doors above us, open, shut, ajar, took on a sudden light. It was but rarely that one saw that illumination of her face.

"*Where* is the secret stair?" she asked, with a quick intaking of her breath. "Have you never looked?"

It seemed to me at that moment, as my eyes followed hers and all my boyhood's love for mystery and adventure sprang to answer, as remarkable that I had never looked, had accepted merely as a legend of the house and probed no further into a heritage so full of charm. The complications of affairs outside, since I had come to the estate, the wealth of what was visible in my new realm, had occupied my thoughts.

"We will find it," I cried, "you and I! We will look now!"

I held out my hand to her, a cousin's hand, but it was like her that she did not seem to see. Together, excited as two children, we

sped us up the stairs. We whispered, tiptoed, like two who were on some clandestine, forbidden quest.

"The attic first," Elizabeth declared with eagerness. She slipped, a swift, light-footed figure, up the yellow steps, her white gown glimmering before me in the gloom. We rapped on old partitions hung with cobwebs, we tested boards belonging to long-peaceful colonies of spiders, we came down to the quaint old sleeping-rooms, we opened doors, we searched in passages, we measured walls whose thickness caused us to give up in despair from sounding. We went through every cranny of the house below, we stood afar off on the lawn outside and counted windows, calculated corners. Our eyes, encountering across the table that night at dinner, were alight with interest undampened by the failure of our expedition. Aunt Matilda, behind the silver service, found us abstracted, baffling. The seed was sown. The entrance to the passage leading to the romantic hiding-place we sought, the only one by which it could be reached, was so cunningly concealed, the legend said, that no one but the devil could find where — but Elizabeth and I had taken up the glove. The house had become to both of us, from that time, a place of one idea, in which one thing alone was paramount — the House of the Secret Stair.

I saw afterward what it had meant to me, the ensuing period of close communion as we carried on our search, — the light step that was kept beside me by a common quest, the eyes, so quick to look away, which met with mine at last in real companionship, held by a common interest, the glimpses of her elfin soul that Elizabeth was not aware she gave. For days, for weeks, we searched together, until, compelled to do so, we nominally gave it up. Both of us realized that it was only nominal. Each knew that the other searched alone. We could not give it up. We stood committed. It had become, by then, a mania with us. We would, we must, search for the secret stair till it were found. It was in our manner, in our faces, in our studious avoidance of the subject talked about so long. We met on errands that admitted of no other explanation, although we always strove to give one, at unexpected times, in unexpected rooms.

It was late one afternoon when, coming suddenly into the library where we were wont to sit, Aunt Matilda, Elizabeth, and

I, at seasons when we came together, I found Elizabeth at her embroidery. She was not embroidering, I knew it in the brief impression. The embroidery-frame was trembling in her hands. Was it the late sun through the leaded windows, throwing a mist behind her pale face and soft gown? Her hair against the blended tints of books that lined the walls, touched here and there with gold? Something in Elizabeth herself that I had never seen or felt before? I only knew — it comes to every man at least once in a lifetime — that I knew.

"Elizabeth," I cried, "I love you!" and I felt the earth go round beneath my feet.

She rose quickly and slipped past me, her eyes, as she stood between me and the door, appealing, startled, wondrous, meeting mine through the veil of strangeness and shyness that had fallen again betwixt us as they had done in that brief period of comradeship, her hands clasped to her breast.

"I love you, too," she said.

I held my arms to her, but she took another swift step back and shook her head. There was a change in her expression, an almost — was it mirthful? — lighting of her face.

"When," she said, — "when you have found the secret stair!"

"Elizabeth," I cried, "Now! Now!" but she was gone. I heard, as I had expected, her laughter in the hall. Something in the sound, that ripple that I dared not follow, told me more. A light broke on me, in my joy and my dilemma, and I understood the laughter. *She had found it!* That evening — it was the only question that I dared to ask her — she told me so, in words.

I knew Elizabeth too well not to know that I must win her in her own way or not at all. She was of those sweetest, wilful dames of times gone by who demanded of their knights a proof of love, for whom men courted perils and crossed swords, who dwelt in lofty towers, none more eagerly sought after, to which men must climb. Did I eagerly desire her? her manner, dear and distant, told me. I would win her! I would seek! I would seek, I was seeking, all the love of her that had sprung into being in me silently assured her. Was it a knight's part to make complaint or question of his lady's will? Surely no knight of ancient days of chivalry sought, for his lady's sake, more fervently than I.

The way, at first, seemed to lie bright to the goal of my desires. If Elizabeth could find the secret passage, so could I. I stood on the lawn and ran imaginary lines, figured and calculated and measured — and I knew that Elizabeth watched me, sitting at her tower window. I caught at times, through the gap, framed high up in the larches, the flutter of her sleeve. The secret passage, no doubt, had led to one of the rooms we were now using, formerly enclosed by blind walls, but now open, its partitions taken out, and the door or panel to the hidden stair walled up. There was no place in the house where a room unknown to me could be concealed, but the walls were of such a thickness and so curiously constructed that at many points an extremely narrow passage might exist. But where? Entrance there was, Elizabeth had assured me — the very entrance handed down by the story — but where, where was it?

There was no mouse-hole in the house, no ant-hole in the grounds outside, it seemed to me, that I allowed to escape my observation. I pondered carefully the words of the old legend: "Hidden so well that no one but the devil could find where." Would not the devil supposably be underground? Underground I looked. Could it be in the foundations, beneath the massive cellar floors, overlaid with later-time cement? Unless I pulled down the house, a liberty the iron terms of the will that made it mine would not allow, there was nothing further I could do. Elizabeth, a girl, had found it — and I could not!

One day, after I had abandoned hope, I was cheered by the unexpected visit of an old friend — a college classmate — now making name and fame in engineering projects of almost world-wide interest. During his brief stay I could not refrain from telling him of my peculiar quest and its failure, but the only consolation he would offer on departing was: "Well, old fellow, take my word as a practical man, you will never find that stairway until you tear down the house."

I stood by the newel in the hall with spirits low in me, on the morning that he left, and as I stood I felt a light touch, from the step above me, on my sleeve. It was Elizabeth, whom I had not seen, except at the table and at her window, for a week. Dear minister of comfort for the first, sweet time — she left her hand rest-

ing on my arm. Could it be true, ah, was it really there, that which I thought I saw beneath the playfulness written on her face?

"Richard," she asked — she had never failed before to prefix it with the Cousin — "Are we never going to have that little roast pig?"

Her voice — it seemed to me for one brief, intoxicating moment — was full of love and longing, of tenderness, an echo of the voice in my own heart! I held my hands to her, but she had flown, a vision, always, to enchant and disappear.

Aunt Chloe had long been threatening to roast us a little pig, in Southern style, and I immediately sought our old black sovereign and tyrant in her domain.

"Well, Mars' Richard," she said, "I'll roas' him today — dat is if yo'll fix my oven fo' me. De bricks dey fall in de oven las' night again. Deyse fallen twice now — an' Miss Elizabeth done fix 'em befo'."

I took the candle that she gave me and, swinging back the door of the big, old-fashioned oven bricked into the wall — from which, exhaling heat and savory odors there were wont familiarly to issue on the flat, long-handled shovel our daily bread and biscuits, meat and poultry, cakes and pies — put in my head. I was met, in the now cool, black cavern, by a little puff of clammy air and dust. Four or five of the bricks from around its iron roof had — Elizabeth! Elizabeth! — as Aunt Chloe had told me, fallen down.

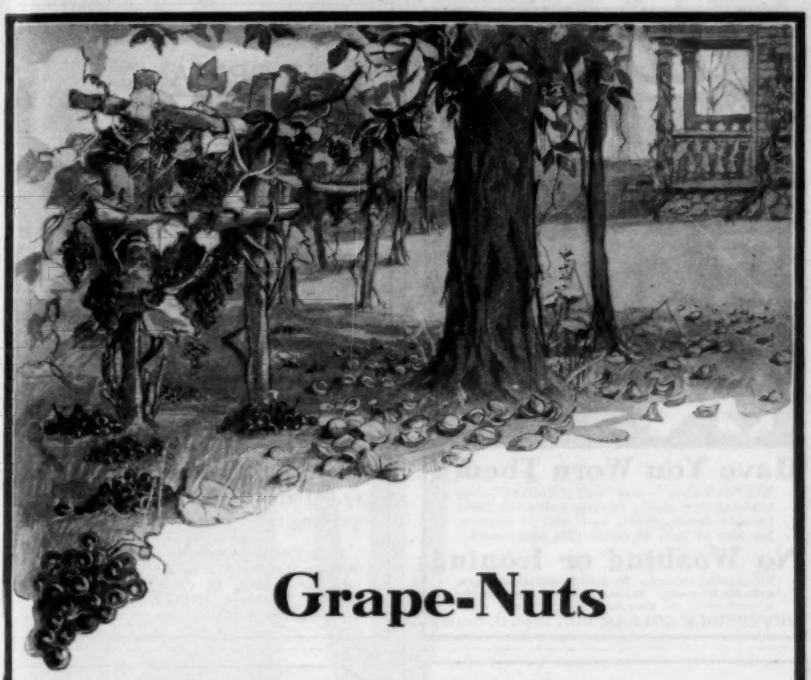
I drew back, with the candle. If Aunt Chloe had not been occupied with other interests she would have seen that I was not the same man who went in.

"I think that I can fix it for you, Aunt Chloe," I told her carelessly, waiting anxiously behind me, "but I'll have to have the kitchen to myself awhile. Isn't there something you can find to do up-stairs?"

"'Tain't gwine to hurt you any to have me 'round here, Marsa Richard," she retorted, much offended, but I insisted that she leave me, as master of the house. As soon as I had heard the last of her retreating footsteps I seized the rolling-pin that she had left lying on the table, the only hammer I could find available, and with an arm made strong by what I saw, brought down other of the bricks

around the oven-roof. The iron top of the oven, its grooves in the disordered brickwork, was a sliding door. It yielded to my efforts, groaning, and slid back — and the secret stairway was before me, its iron parts, leading from the oven, bedded in the solid masonry with mighty bolts. Hidden so well, I told myself in ecstasy, regarding it, that no one but the devil, that gentleman accustomed to a warm temperature, could have found it — through the roaring fire of cheer the inmates of the house, the famous fugitive once hidden, took care to keep up while King George's soldiers were about! Hidden from us as hopelessly as from the Redcoats, by the warmth with which Aunt Chloe kept it radiating and her famous dishes, browning odorously within! I did not stop to follow that old master at the game of hide-and-seek in his crooked, dark and sadly cramping, if safe, passage through the walls; to discover that it was a little store-room, its partitions now thrown open and the doorway from the secret stair walled over, into which the passage led — the whole house having seemingly been planned to conceal the ingenious contrivance, defying detection to the last. All that came afterward — like Aunt Chloe's dread wrath. I took me to my love.

When Elizabeth and I had returned from our all too brief honeymoon at the White Sulphur — and Aunt Matilda had gracefully resigned her rustling, black-silken reign — we strolled hand in hand through the old Colonial mansion, planning a few — a very few — more modern improvements. As we stepped together into the spacious kitchen, followed by the aged colored cook, I fancied I caught a sudden gleam of amused understanding pass between them. In the privacy of our apartments that evening I charged Elizabeth with having told Aunt Chloe to call me to repair the oven on a momentous occasion, but she only smiled, and would not answer — then nor since.



Grape-Nuts

are not made of either Grapes or Nuts.

But of the selected elements of Wheat and Barley.

The name was suggested by the Grape Sugar which is produced by the processes of making, in which the starchy part of these grains is changed into what is technically known as **Grape Sugar** (really pre-digested starch) which is in the most perfect state possible for easy digestion.

Therefore, the person with a weak stomach has a perfect food in

Grape-Nuts

Postum Cereal Co., Ltd., Battle Creek, Mich., U. S. A.